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BODY:
   Americans are clipping coupons faster than ever, trimming their grocery bills by more than a billion dollars a year.

   The A.C. Nielsen Co., which handles redemption programs for many coupon distributors, says consumers redeemed 5.56 billion manufacturers' coupons in 1983, up 24 percent from 1982. That compared with an increase of 17 percent the previous year, and it meant that total redemptions over the last four years have risen by 62 percent.

   The coupons are steadily gaining in value. In 1982, the coupons redeemed were worth $1.2 billion, with an average value of 21.7 cents each. In 1983, the coupons were worth almost $1.7 billion, with an average face value of 30.5 cents each.

   While the number and value of coupons increases, however, the redemption rate remains relatively low. In 1983, manufacturers distributed about 142.9 billion coupons, meaning that only 4 percent were cashed in by shoppers.

   Note: These figures represent manufacturers' coupons only. They do not include the coupons issued by the stores themselves on a local basis.

   Consumers looking for coupons are most likely to find them in daily and Sunday newspapers; more than one-third of the coupons issued are in free-standing inserts in the Sunday paper; one-fifth are in the pages of the daily paper.

   You can get more out of coupons if you take a little time to plan your strategy. Among the ways to save the most:

   Combine coupon and refund offers. Look for coupons for products that also offer a refund for a proof-of-purchase seal. And keep an eye out for stores in your area giving double and triple value for coupons. You could end up getting something for free or actually being paid for using a product. Here's how: Suppose you have a 30-cent coupon for paper plates normally costing $1.29.

Grocery store "A" gives triple value for coupons this week. When you get to the store, you find a form offering a $1 refund if you buy two packages of paper plates. Buy two packages and pay $1.68 _ regular price for the first package and 39 cents for the coupon-reduced second package. Mail in the appropriate information and get back $1. Your total expenditure was $1.88, including a stamp for the refund letter. But your final, out-of-pocket cost is 88 cents for something that normally would have cost $2.58. One package was free, the second cost 41 cents less than without the coupon and refund. If you'd had two coupons, you would have made a net profit.

Look for local tie-ins that allow you to save on staples. Government and university studies have shown that coupons for staples like milk, meat or fresh produce are rare. But you may be able to find a manufacturer's coupon issued in conjunction with a local promotion that does the trick. An ice cream company, for example, might have a tie-in for a discount on fresh fruit.

Know your prices before you start. Compare the quality and price of generic and house brands before you jump at a coupon for a national brand. The national brand may be more expensive with the coupon, than the house or generic brand without. You also should make sure that you don't sacrifice overall value for the sake of coupons. If you take your business to a store that offers double or triple value for coupons, but has consistently higher prices on non-coupon items, you could wind up paying more in the long run. It may be worthwhile to split your shopping list.

Watch out for strings and don't buy items you won't use. Some stores will make coupon use conditional: Buy a fixed amount of groceries at regular price and save on specials. Make sure the bottom line really is a saving. And avoid items you wouldn't buy if you didn't have a coupon; an 89-cent item for 59 cents is no bargain if it winds up in the garbage.